

Bringing dance to life

Noa Eshkol, daughter of a prime minister and inventor of movement notation, lives on through the work of the American artist Sharon Lockhart in two new exhibitions.

By Elad Samorzik

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When Sharon Lockhart was 22 and backpacking in Israel, in the early 80s, she spent two months tomato-picking in a Moshav in southern Israel, saving up for her next destination – India. Back then, one could hardly guess that decades later she would return, a successful artist, studying Noa Eshkol's work and translating it into two exhibits: one in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, which opened on Tuesday, and one in Tel Aviv's Museum of Modern Art, which opens on Thursday.

In fact, Lockhart had never even heard of Noa Eshkol until a few years ago. In 2008 she came to Israel for a short visit, part of a joint venture between the cities of Tel Aviv and Los Angeles, in order to examine ideas that might inform her work as an artist. Among them were museum preservation, anthropology, Bauhaus, textiles and post-modern dance. She rummaged in the textile division of the Israel Museum's storeroom for an entire day. It was great, she says, but Lockhart didn't really know what she was looking for.

On her way back to Tel Aviv, Diana Shoef of the Center for Contemporary Art, who accompanied Lockhart on her visit, told her about Eshkol, who, along with the revolutionary movement notation she developed in the 1950s with Abraham Wachman, created dances and amazing wall carpets. By the next day, Lockhart had already visited Eshkol's home in Holon, which after the artist's death turned into a sort of center for her legacy.

Her students are active there during the day, practicing dances, transcribing them - Eshkol and Wachman's movement notation is a written language for recording and studying movement - and preserving the legacy of their spiritual mother in various ways. "They danced for me and took my breath away," Lockhart recalls. "It was so beautiful. They dance in the morning, eat lunch together and then practice the notation. They have an archivist and five main dancers who danced with Noa for decades. I went there every day, studied and tried to understand. It's so complex. It took me years to understand movement notation and I also viewed the tapestries. There are 1,800 of them stored on shelves that fill an entire room."

Eshkol's art comes to life through film

The intensive research, which went on for four years, gave birth to the current pair of exhibitions, titled Sharon Lockhart | Noa Eshkol.

The exhibit at the Israel Museum, curated by Talia Amar, centers around a multi-channel video installation. The impressive piece displays Eshkol's "Theme and Variations" suite performed by members of the current chamber dance group named for the woman, who herself did not like the title "choreographer."

The dances, documented in these films for the first time, are projected on five huge blocks. Though Eshkol kept her artistic disciplines separate from each other, the films stage her dances against the background of nine wall hangings.

The blocks are placed at different angles in the large, sterile space, where the tick of metronomes is heard. That sound always accompanied Eshkol's minimalistic dances, which were performed without music, costumes or special lighting. The size of the screens, the decision where to place them on the floor and at what angles, and the choice to use a static camera create the feeling that the dancers are working with us, in one space.

A small number of Lockhart's photos hang in the adjacent space, showing the metal ball models that Eshkol used to represent her movement notation. On one side of the space are three glass cases with archival material like sketches connected to notation and excerpts from Eshkol's diaries and photos. On the other side are three large blocky platforms on the floor with wall hangings from different decades, taken from the enormous collection. The wall hangings capture our attention: "Four seasons," "King Muki the first"

(sewn from an army blanket), and "Chinese circus."

Eshkol started making wall hangings during the Yom Kippur War ("Movement notation depends on real people and people weren't there," she once explained). She used remnants of fabrics that were brought to her from all over the country by friends and admirers - they called themselves the "rag brigade." These scraps were not cut, but rather placed on sheets of material and sewn by her dancers. Lockhart says that hundreds of unfinished tapestries remain, in which the scraps are pinned to the fabric but have not been sewn on. Two years ago, 50 hangings were exhibited at the Open Museum in Tefen, and purchased by Stef Wertheimer, the owner of the museum.

"I wanted to take a different approach," Lockhart says about her decision to spread out the hangings on flat surfaces and not hang them on walls. "Since they are archived items, I wanted to treat them this way. When I visited Tefen I didn't like the way they were hung. And when Noa made them, she always treated them like this." Lockhart kneels down. "They were always on the floor. It's about a connection to the ground."

Why did you choose these three particular hangings?

"It was very hard to choose. I was helped by people in Noa's foundation; they know the materials very well, and everything was done in cooperation with them. In the end there was the desire to exhibit pieces from different periods, to show different things, and also from an aesthetic point of view, how [the hangings] suited the room and their proportions."

The exhibit at the Center for Contemporary Art, curated by Sergio Edelsztein, includes a film projected in the upper room, alongside pieces from the archive. In the film, four dances are performed by one of Eshkol's most veteran dancers, Ruti Sela, now 72. In these solos, filmed against four large gray blocks, Lockhart challenges Eshkol's principle that dance must involve at least two people.

No less significant an attraction can be found in the lower room, which has been transformed into an intimate performance space with seating. Dancers will hold open rehearsals, performances, workshops, meetings and lectures there through the end of February. All activities are connected to Eshkol's varied legacy.

The prime minister's daughter

Lockhart talks about Eshkol with exceptional, even childlike, enthusiasm, thirsting to hear any potentially undiscovered detail about the woman, who has become the object of her admiration in recent years. Lockhart admits that aside from the appreciation she has for Eshkol's artistic activities, for her, a good part of Eshkol's charm stems from the many stories about the atypical woman.

Eshkol was an exceptional figure; mysterious and complicated. An admired, anti-establishment artist who loathed publicity and refused to be nominated for the Israel Prize, Eshkol gathered a group of admirers around herself who viewed her as a kind of guru. She did not seek fame or a large audience when she mounted her productions from time to time - in her opinion, the dances she created were meant to produce an experience for the creator and the performer, and not for an audience. She was a tempestuous woman who smoked incessantly, drank whiskey and supplied the gossip columns of Haolam Hazeh with her doings in Tel Aviv.

Noa Eshkol was born in Kibbutz Degania Bet in 1924, the daughter of Levi Eshkol, the third prime minister of the state of Israel. She was the student of musician and pianist Frank Peleg and studied at Tehila Ressler's dance school. Afterward, she traveled to Britain, studied movement and dance, trained at the studio of Rudolf Von Laban and studied his movement notation. She also studied with the choreographer Siegwald Lieder, met Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais and the dancer and painter John Harris, with whom she worked.

When she returned to Israel in the 1950s, she made a living teaching, studied dance notation and established a chamber dance group in which she danced in its first years alongside Naomi Poloni and Mirele Sharon. A book she wrote with her student Abraham Wachman (later a professor of architecture at the Technion), *Movement Notation*, in which their system was presented for the first time, was published in London in 1958. To elaborate on this mythological movement notation, it is a graphic system for mapping movement in space and time, and it allows the objective definition of human body movements in space using geometric and mathematical tools. The notation is meant for documentation of movement and research; for both the writing of dances based on the anatomical fact that every limb of the body moves on the axis to which it is attached, via joints, to other limbs, in a way that produces circular movements.

Movement notation is used today in dance frameworks at a plethora of academic institutions in Israel and abroad. However, it also serves to follow the movements of animals and to map the language of deaf mutes. Movement notation is also used in the treatment of learning disabilities, early diagnosis of autism and scientific research in many fields, and it was even adopted at a certain stage by NASA in order to describe the movement of astronauts in situations of weightlessness.

Throughout her lifetime, Eshkol continued to develop her notation system and devoted herself to creating dances and tapestries. She taught movement at many academic institutions and was even granted a professorship in 1972 in the arts faculty of the Tel Aviv University.

"I would have been glad to have met her," Lockhart says of Eshkol. "Everyone says that she probably wouldn't have let me do what I did, but I'd like to think she would have appreciated my approach."

When Lockhart talks about her approach, she perhaps means the minimalistic aesthetic of her work, which, according to curator Amar, is exactly what connects the two artists. "Noa's dances are in essence late minimalism," Amar says. "The precision, formality, structures, the bare stage. For many years [Lockhart's] work has been structured, minimalistic and meticulous."

The expressiveness of the wall hangings seems to contradict the minimalism of Eshkol's dances, Amar admits. But she finds a similarity between the compositions on the rugs and the drawings of movement notation. They are also both produced by from very little: the

fabric scraps were in essence waste products from factories and tailor shops.

A journey and a mission

There is no catalog yet for the exhibitions, but Lockhart is working on a thick volume in Hebrew and English. She intends for it to be published when the Israel Museum exhibit moves to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in June 2012.

Eshkol published dozens of books related to movement notation, and Lockhart stresses that her book about Eshkol and her art is personally significant. It will contain articles, interviews with dancers, biographical information about both artists, photos of some of the hangings and additional archival material.

Lockhart, who was born in 1964 in Massachusetts and lives today in Los Angeles, is mainly a photographer and filmmaker.

She often creates in the wake of her encounters with different communities around the world. One of her works, Goshogaoka (1998), documents a group of Japanese teenage girls exercising in a gym. It was recently acquired for the Israel Museum collection.

"I want Noa's work to be seen and understood in the world, [to become] part of the history of dance," Lockhart says. "I think that what she did is very exciting for the younger generation."

Will the show appear in other museums?

"We hope so, in Europe and New York. I think that Noa lives on."

This story is by: Elad Samorzik